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Vanuatu, China reject reports of plans to host China military base

Ralph Regenvanu has told SBS News that reports China is seeking to build a military base in Vanuatu are "fake news".

File photo Source: AAP

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Vanuatu and China have both rejected reports that China is seeking to establish a military base in the Pacific nation.

Fairfax Media reported on Tuesday that China approached Vanuatu about building a permanent military presence in the South Pacific.

However Vanuatu's foreign minister Ralph Regenvanu told SBS News the report was "fake news" manufactured by the "SMH (Sydney Morning Herald) journalist."

He also told the ABC on Tuesday there had been no preliminary discussions with China.

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"No one in the Vanuatu government has ever talked about a Chinese military base in Vanuatu of any sort," he said.

"We are a non-aligned country. We are not interested in militarisation, we are just not interested in any sort of military base in our country."

In Beijing, China's defense ministry said the claim "completely did not accord with the facts", while a foreign ministry spokesman described it as "fake news".

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he had been advised there had been no request from China for Vanuatu to host a base.

But he said it was important the Pacific be maintained as a peaceful region.

"The maintenance of peace and stability in the Pacific is of utmost importance to us," Mr Turnbull told reporters in Brisbane on Tuesday.

"We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific island countries and neighbours of ours."

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said she is confident of Australia's strong relationship with the island nation 1750km east of northern Australia.

> **"We have very good relationships with Vanuatu and I remain confident that Australia is Vanuatu's strategic partner of choice. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop"**

Ms Bishop said while China was investing in infrastructure around the world, it had to date only established one military base - in Djibouti in northern Africa.

"I'm not aware of a military offer being made by China to Vanuatu," she told ABC radio on Tuesday, noting the government of Vanuatu had also said there was no such proposal.

"We have very good relationships with Vanuatu and I remain confident that Australia is Vanuatu's strategic partner of choice."

According to the Fairfax report, initial talks have already begun with Vanuatu, which could result in China establishing a major military presence and upsetting the delicate strategic balance in the region.

Chinese money has already helped finance a new wharf on the north island of Espiritu Santo, alongside an upgrade to the international airport, it was reported.

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The ability for China to dock warships and refuel on what would be their first Pacific base has rung alarm bells among Australian security chiefs, as well as New Zealand and US officials, who are said to be monitoring the situation, Fairfax says.

China had been more engaged with the Pacific recently and its naval ships visited Vanuatu in 2017, but those sorts of visits were normal for all nations to conduct, Ms Bishop said.

The Lowy Institute's Pacific islands expert, Jonathan Pryke, says the new Luganville wharf development had "raised eyebrows in defence, intelligence and diplomatic circles" in Australia.

Ms Bishop said more infrastructure spending was needed in the Pacific but the key question was how it was invested and the terms of that investment.

Vanuatu's high commissioner in Canberra, Kalfau Kaloris, was quoted as saying his country's foreign ministry was "not aware" of China's determination to build a permanent presence on the island.

- With Reuters

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